



The Future of Airport Lounge Experiences

What Travelers Really Want from Food,
Beverage and Hospitality

Image by Andrew Werner



Executive Summary

Airport lounges are becoming an increasingly important part of the premium travel experience. For airlines, airports, and card issuers, they offer an opportunity to build loyalty through memorable guest experiences.

Research from Sodexo Live! and YouGov among lounge travelers in the US and UK shows that lounges are welcoming a broader mix of guests, while frequent business and first-class travelers continue to have high expectations for premium hospitality.

Key Research Findings

Premium starts with the guest experience

Comfortable spaces. Attentive service. Culinary excellence.

Together, these are the experiences travelers most closely associate with a premium airport lounge.

The right experience at the right time

Expectations change throughout the day.

Morning and late-night call for fresh, convenient food and self-service. Lunch and dinner expectations shift toward made-to-order, live cooking, and table service.

Choice meets sense of place

Travelers want both personalization and local flavor.

Made-to-order dishes give travelers more choice, while locally inspired food and beverage create a stronger connection to the destination.

Premium is worth paying for

Travelers expect complimentary drinks, but they'll pay for something distinctive.

What this means

Food and beverage is increasingly shaping how travelers experience, and ultimately, remember airport lounges.

The future of airport lounge experiences will be shaped by the quality of food, beverage, and hospitality they deliver.

Airport Lounges Become a Brand Experience

Lounges are no longer just a travel perk

They are becoming an increasingly important part of the journey.

As premium travel grows and access expands through airline loyalty programs and credit cards, lounges are welcoming a broader mix of travelers with increasingly diverse expectations.

Every interaction shapes the brand

Airport lounges have become an extension of an airline's or card issuer's brand. Every interaction, from the welcome to the food and beverage, shapes how travelers perceive that brand.

Food and beverage play a central role in bringing that brand experience to life.



63%

of lounge guests in the US & 68% in the UK are not traveling in business or first class.

At the same time,

Premium travelers

remain among the most frequent lounge users.

What Travelers Define as Premium

Airport lounges have invested heavily in beautiful spaces and expanded access. Our research shows that travelers judge a premium experience by much more than design alone.

Across the US and UK, regardless of cabin class, travelers consistently define premium in the same way.

01

**Comfortable,
uncrowded
spaces**

*A place to work or
relax*

02

**Attentive,
knowledgeable
staff**

Personalized service

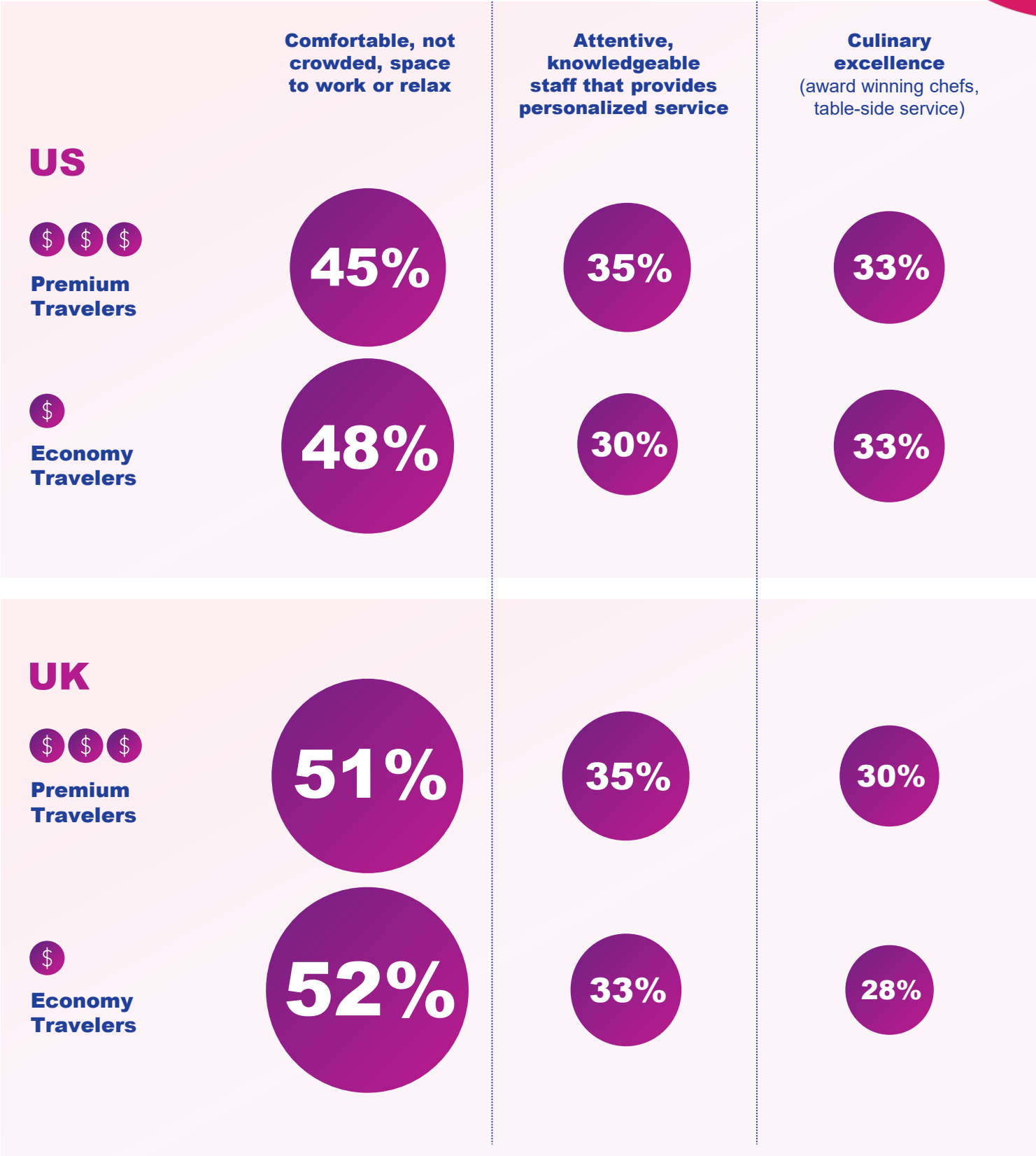
03

**Culinary
excellence**

*Restaurant quality
dining*



Top 3 Luxury Signifiers



US Base: Premium Fliers | n=491; Nonpremium Fliers | n=555
UK Base: Premium Fliers | n=373; Nonpremium Fliers | n=747
Q32. Thinking about hospitality occasions at different venues such as airport lounges, hotels, and restaurants, what MOST signifies a premium or luxury experience to you?
% Ranked #1 or #2

The Right Experience at the Right Time

No two travelers are the same. And the same traveler wants something different at 7 a.m. than at 7 p.m.

How Traveler Needs Change Throughout the Day

	 Breakfast	 Lunch	 Dinner	 Late night
 Guest mindset	Focused, on the move	In transition, ready for a moment	Relaxed, ready to unwind	Tired, keeping it simple
 Premium travelers	Light, fresh, healthy and convenient (US & UK)	Convenient, healthy, comfort foods (US) Premium foods & beverages, healthy light, fresh (UK)	Premium/upscale foods & beverages, indulgent and healthy options (US & UK)	Light, fresh, convenient, with comfort foods rounding out the experience (US & UK)
 Economy travelers	Light, fresh, healthy and convenient (US & UK)	Quick, healthy, local flavors (US) Quick, healthy, light, fresh (UK)	Local flavors, indulgent, healthy (US) Indulgent, comfort foods, healthy (UK)	Light, fresh, convenient, healthy (US) Light, fresh, convenient, with comfort foods rounding out the experience (UK)

US Base: Premium Fliers | n=491; Nonpremium Fliers | n=555
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Q10. Which types of food and beverage options [are | would be] most appealing to you when visiting an airport lounge during the following occasion?

What the Data Reveals

01

Self-service is the foundation

Across markets, cabin classes, and times of day, travelers prefer self-service buffets and grab-and-go options. At lunch and dinner, premium travelers also expect table service, made-to-order dishes, and elevated food and beverages

02

Breakfast is remarkably consistent

Across markets and traveler types, travelers want light, fresh, healthy food that's quick and easy to access.

03

Lunch is where preferences begin to differ

UK premium travelers are more likely to choose table service and premium food and beverages, while US premium travelers are comfortable with counter service and high-quality self-service. Economy travelers prioritize healthy, convenient meals.

04

Dinner is the biggest opportunity to differentiate

Expectations are highest, particularly among premium travelers. This is when table service, made-to-order dishes, and upscale food and beverages matter most.

05

Late night brings travelers back together

Across markets and traveler types, travelers return to fresh, convenient food, comfort dishes, and self-service.

From Insight to Menu Design

01 **Familiar first. Discovery second.**

Familiar dishes become memorable when they're prepared with quality ingredients and thoughtful local touches.

Travelers gravitate toward food they recognize. Fresh, well-prepared versions of familiar dishes are more appealing than menus focused on novelty.

02 **Choice and place go hand in hand.**

Made-to-order dishes and live cooking stations give travelers more choice at a time when much of their journey is outside their control.

Locally inspired food and beverage help a lounge reflect its destination, giving travelers a sense of place rather than an experience that could be found in any airport.



Looking Ahead

Airport lounges have evolved from places to wait into destinations.

The lounge experience is becoming an important part of the travel journey.

Premium is defined by the guest experience

Travelers judge a lounge by the overall experience, from the space and service to the food and beverage.

Lounges serve a broader mix of travelers

Business travelers, leisure travelers, premium cabin passengers, and cardholders now share the same space.

Food and beverage have become a defining part of the lounge experience

It shapes how travelers experience a lounge and what they remember most.



Our Approach

We help airlines, airports, and card issuers create premium airport lounge experiences that passengers remember and want to return to.

Global Experience

180 lounges across 53 airports worldwide

We work with each client to create experiences that reflect their brand and their guests.

Food & Beverage that Travelers Remember

A global culinary team of 500+ chefs

Our chefs create menus inspired by local ingredients, fine dining, and the character of each destination.

We also partner with acclaimed chefs including Mashama Bailey, Sarah Grueneberg, and Yves Camdeborde.

Where Great Hospitality Begins

92% retention after HMF program

Our teams develop their hospitality and leadership skills through the Sodexo Live! Academy.

About the Research

Sodexo Live! partnered with YouGov to survey 2,166 air travelers across the US and UK, all aged 18 to 70, and all having flown first or business class and/or visited an airport lounge within the past year. Conducted online in Q4 2025, the research utilized YouGov's proprietary panels and census-click methodology to produce a sample representative of the broader air traveler population.

